THE *MENO*

Some Prolegomena…

Many philosophers think that the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Symposium* are linked by the emergence and development in them of Plato's positive philosophical project (most notably, his theory of the Forms)…

» The *Meno* begins with the question of whether virtue can be taught. This leads to an inquiry into the nature of virtue itself—what is the one form shared in common by all the virtues that makes each of them a virtue? Various answers are proposed and rejected. Then Meno introduces a general problem for the (and perhaps any) inquiry: if neither he nor Socrates knows what virtue is, how will they recognize it if they find it? This general "problem" is often referred to as 'Meno's paradox' (or the 'paradox of inquiry'). Socrates answers Meno's challenge by positing the theory of recollection, which he attempts to underwrite by the examination of the slave boy (82a-86c). The dialogue then returns to the original question of whether virtue can be taught and ultimately ends in a state of *aporia* ('perplexity').

» The theory of recollection put forward in the *Meno* assumes that the soul is immortal and this is one of the reasons why philosophers think that it is linked to the *Phaedo*. For in the *Phaedo*, explicit arguments are given in favor of the immortality of the soul, the theory of recollection is modified and enriched, and we also learn a lot more about the nature of the Forms and about the role that they play not just in ethics but also in science, cosmology, etc.

» And in the *Symposium*, Plato gives us one of his most vivid accounts of the "ascent of the soul" from the visible, tangible particulars of "this world" to the intelligible, abstract "world of the Forms", and the role that love (*eros*) supposedly plays in helping us to make that ascent.

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## Context and Outline of the Dialogue...

Part I – What is 'virtue'?

» The initial question: Can virtue be taught? (70a)

» Socrates' *definitional priority*: We must know what virtue IS before we can know any of its qualities. So, what IS virtue? (71b)

» Meno's 1st definition and Socrates' refutation (71e-73c)

» Meno's 2nd definition and Socrates' refutation (73d-77b)

» Meno's 3rd definition and Socrates' refutation (77b-79e)

Interlude: the paradox of inquiry and the theory of recollection

» Meno's offensive challenge (the *paradox of inquiry*): how can you inquire into something if you know nothing about it? (80d)

» Socrates' response: 'knowledge is recollection' (81a-82a)

» An illustration of recollection – Socrates' interview with the slave boy (82b)

Part II – Can 'virtue' be taught?

» If virtue is knowledge, then it can be taught (86e). And if virtue is knowledge, then there ought to be teachers and pupils of it (89d-e). But there are no teachers and pupils of virtue (89e-96c). So, it looks like more investigation is needed…
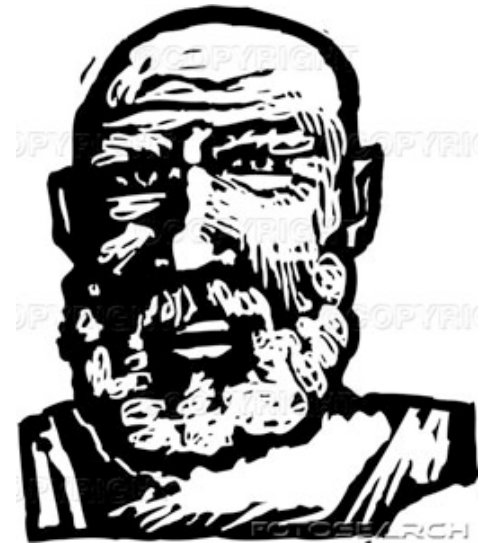
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The set up…

» Recall that Socrates thinks that only a *particular kind* of definition will be able to adequately answer the crucial 'what is it?' question—namely, an essential (or 'conceptual') definition. That is, a definition that accurately describes the 'nature' or 'essence' of the thing in question… a definition of X that satisfies both the '*Captures*' and '*Explains*' conditions.

**Meno's 1st definition and Socrates' refutation (71e-73c)**

» 'Virtue' =df ('is by definition') "a man's virtue is x, a woman's virtue is y"

Meno's 2nd definition and Socrates' refutation (73d-77b)

» 'Virtue' =df ('is by definition') "the power to rule over other people"

Meno's 3rd definition and Socrates' refutation (77b-79e)

» 'Virtue' =df ('is by definition') "desiring fine things and being able to acquire them"
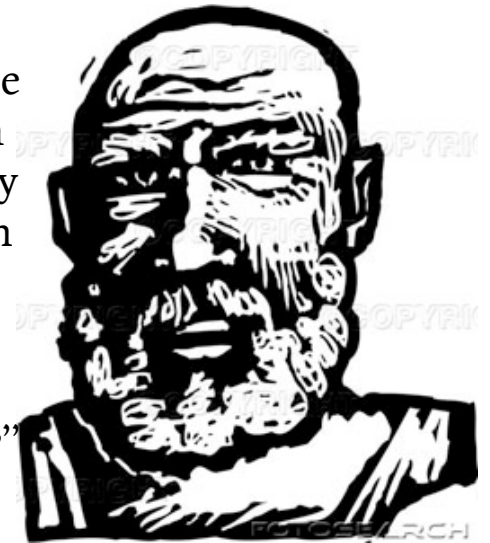
THE *MENO*

The Paradox of Inquiry…

A frustrated Meno goes on the offensive…

"You are using sorcery on me, drugging me, and simply subduing me with spells, so that I am full of puzzles. Indeed, you seem to me… to be altogether similar, both in appearance and other respects, to the flat, saltwater stingray, since it too always numbs whoever comes near and touches it…" (80a)

"How will you inquire into something, Socrates, when you don't at all know what it is? Which of the things that you don't know will you suppose it is, when you are inquiring into it? And even if you happen upon it, how will you know it is the thing you didn't know?" (80d)
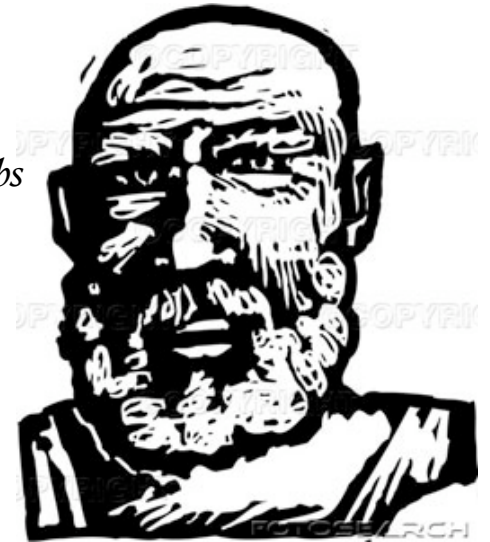
Socrates' reformulation of the paradox…

1. Either S knows what S is looking for OR *it is not the case that* S knows what S is looking for.

2. If S knows what S is looking for, then S *cannot inquire* into X.

3. If *it is not the case that* S knows what S is looking for, then S *cannot inquire* into X.

4. Therefore, in either case, S *cannot inquire into* X.

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Does the conclusion follow from the premises?

» Yes. As it is stated, the argument is valid—in other words, it has the formal structure such that *if the premises are true, then the conclusion must also be true*.

» (1) is a seemingly harmless instantiation of the 'law of the excluded middle'— *either one does or does not know that P*. (2) and (3) just tell us that whichever of these exclusive and exhaustive options obtain, inquiry is impossible. And (4) just makes the valid inference (by Constructive Dilemma) from the premises given.

Are the premises true (or at least reasonable)?

» They look pretty good. Again, (1) appears to be harmless and logically true.

» And rewording (2) and (3) in the following way makes them seem like pretty reasonable premises to accept:

> (2*) If you know what you're looking for, then inquiry is *unnecessary*.

> (3*) If you don't know what you're looking for, then inquiry is *impossible*.

» After all, if you already know P, then it does seem a bit unnecessary to inquire after P. And if you don't know what it is that you're looking for, then how could you ever get started.
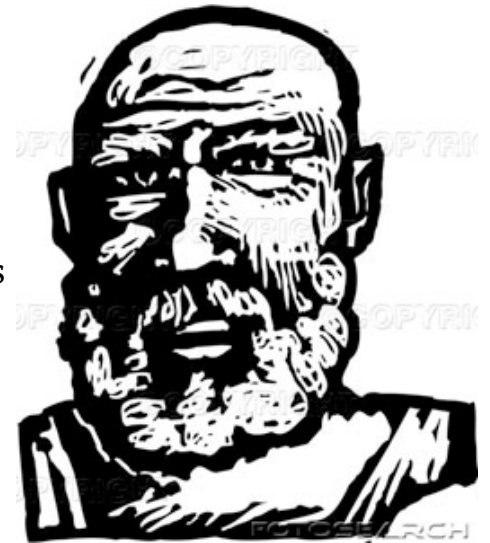
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Socrates' Response to the Paradox…

All 'learning' is recollection…

"Since the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all the things both here and in Hades, there is nothing it has not learned. Hence it is no wonder if it can recall virtue and other things which it previously knew. For since all nature is akin, and since the soul has learned all things, there is nothing to prevent it, when it has recollected one thing—which men call learning—from discovering all the other things, if he is brave and does not tire of inquiring. For inquiring and learning are just recollection…" (81a-82a)
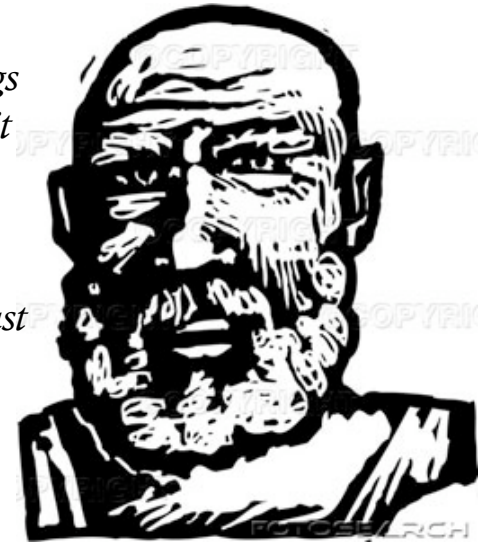
Meno's demand for proof…

» Meno professes not to understand what it means to say that 'learning is just recollection', and so he asks Socrates to teach him that it is (81e).

» Socrates responds by pointing out that since all learning is recollection, there is no such thing as 'teaching', and so he cannot teach Meno that learning is just recollection.

» However, Socrates' says that he can offer an illustration that will help to support (or stronger, 'prove') his point…

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Socrates attempts to prove the theory of recollection be means of interviewing one of Meno's slaves…

> *"Call over to me one of the many attendants you have here… so that I can demonstrate it for you thin this case…" (82a)*

Meno's demand for proof…

» Call the geometrical theorem in question *P*. Socrates assumes that:

1. At time t_1 it appears that the boy does not know that *P*.

2. At time t_2 the boy knows that *P*.

3. The boy does not acquire the knowledge that *P* during the interval between times t_1 and t_2.

» Socrates thinks that (2) is obviously correct, since at t_2 the boy can give a proof that *P*. And he also thinks that (3) is correct since he doesn't do any "teaching" – rather, all he does is *question* the slave boy.

» But (2) and (3) entail that the appearance in (1) is mistaken. In other words, at t_1 the boy really did know that *P*, since he knows at t_2 and didn't acquire the knowledge in the interval between t_1 and t_2.